

Emek Shaveh

Underground Jerusalem: The excavation of tunnels, channels, and underground spaces in the Historic Basin

September 10, 2013

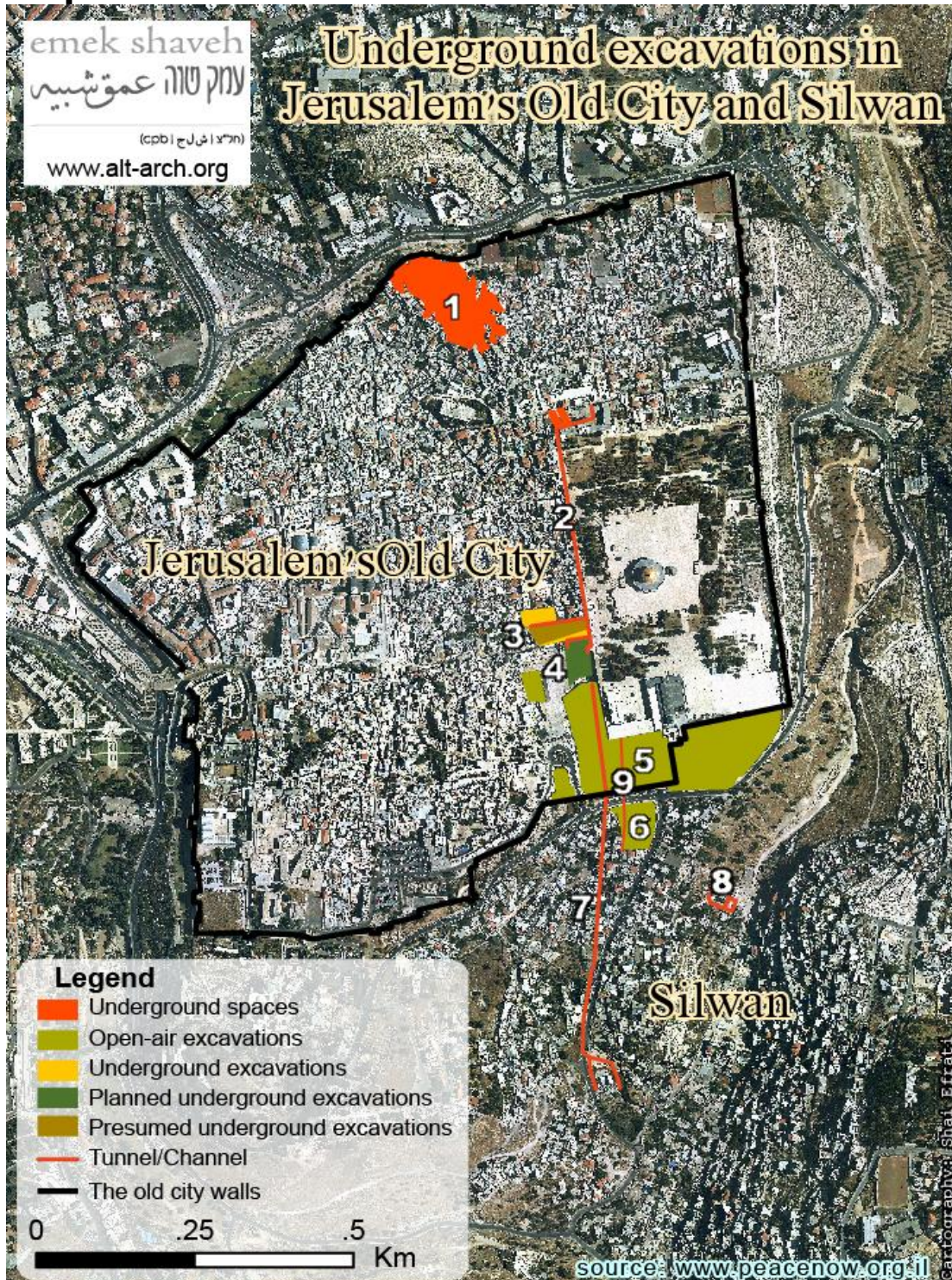
Introduction

The tunnels being dug in the Old City and in the adjacent Palestinian village of Silwan have reached the headlines once again. In the four years since 2007, the Israel Antiquities Authority (henceforth: IAA) seems to have been focusing its efforts and energies on the excavation of channels, tunnels, and underground spaces in the Historic Basin of Jerusalem (The Old City and its environs). Under the mantle of scientific research, the IAA is laying the groundwork for an ideological tourism with political overtones.

Although engaging in ostensibly scientific activity, the IAA provides no easily accessible information regarding the location and objectives of its excavations, the scope of its activities, or the nature of its finds. More often than not, the information about the tunnel excavations is provided after the fact, through a communiqué from the IAA spokesperson, and is not reported transparently during the excavation, as would be expected from a government service acting in the center of a city. Needless to say, such secrecy heightens the suspicion of irregularities, of harm done to archeological finds, and of the advancement of covert goals through the excavations.

The goal of this document is to provide a detailed picture of the state of underground excavations in the Historic Basin. We estimate that additional areas are being excavated, but they are not mentioned in this document, as we do not yet have enough information about them. It is our hope that in the future, the IAA will fill the gaps and provide the public with all the required information about its excavations in the Historic Basin of ancient Jerusalem. Such transparency is vital for the restoration of the trust of the public—including the Palestinian public and the international community—in the archeological activity being undertaken in the city.

Map



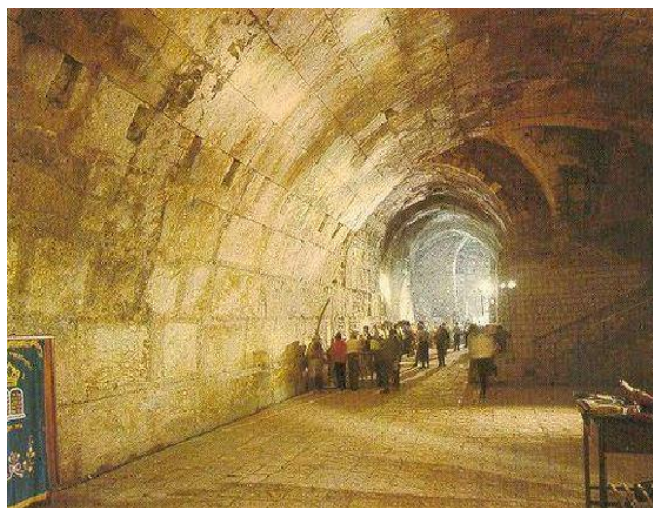
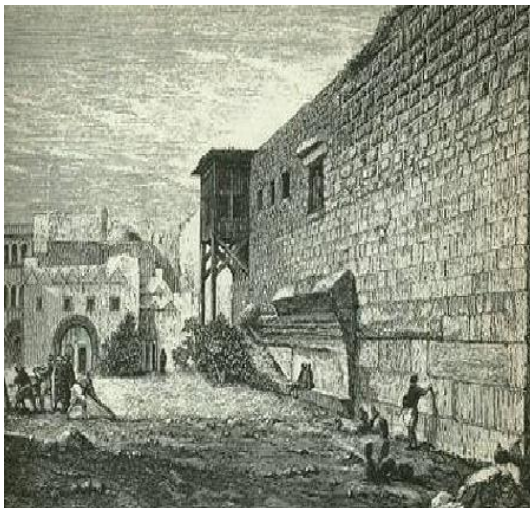
Legend:

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|--------------------------|--|
| 1. Zedekiah Cave | 5. Ophel excavations |
| 2. Western Wall Tunnels | 6. Givati Parking lot excavation |
| 3. Ohel Yizhak Synagogue | 7. Tunnels follows Sewage system and 'Herodian' Street |
| 4. Western Wall Plaza | 8. Gihon's Tunnels |
| | 9. Excavated by Ch. Warren |

Underground excavations in Jerusalem: From 1865 to the present

This intensive interest in underground tunnels and channels, whether ancient or contemporary, turns the clock back some 150 years. At that time, the first European archeologists in Jerusalem, aided by laborers from Jerusalem and its environs, dug deep in the heart of the HolyCity in order to establish its ancient topography and the nature of the structures adjacent to the TempleMount. First and foremost among them was Capt. Charles Warren, R.E. In order to avoid the prying eyes of the Ottoman authorities, Warren dug vertical shafts at some distance from the walls of the TempleMount, and from there he continued to excavate in “galleries”—horizontal tunnels dug along the ancient walls. Warren dug alongside the Western Wall, from the area of Robinson’s Arch in the direction of Barclay’s Gate (one of the gates of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif) and north of there, at points that today constitute part of the network of “Western Wall Tunnels”. He exposed an ancient gate attributed to the temple complex of Herod (1st century B.C.E.), which led to the Temple Mount itself.^[1] Warren’s excavation project was also based on an 1862 [map](#) documenting the wells and water systems on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif.

In addition to the excavations around the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, Warren and his team dug in the adjacent village of Silwan, exposing important parts of a water system dated to Bible-era Jerusalem. Here too, the excavations were conducted deep underground, far from the authorities’ view. Among the things discovered there were shafts, tunnels, and channels—both naturally formed and man-made, that have become known as Warren’s Shaft.



For as long as Ottoman rule lasted in Jerusalem, excavations continued in the shaft/gallery format. In 1894–1897, archeologists F.G. Bliss and A.C. Dickie dug a sprawling system of channels and tunnels around MountZion and the Siloam Pool/Birket al-Hamra. Between 1909 and 1911, an expedition led by M. Parker renewed the investigation of the ancient waterworks of Jerusalem, hoping to find a subterranean passage from the Gihon Spring in

Silwan to the heart of the Temple Mount, where, they hoped, they would discover the treasures of the Temple. Parker and his crew explored the Siloam Tunnel and Warren's Shaft and dug new galleries,^[2] but had to abandon the excavation following the disclosure of their attempt to bribe some Waqf guards in order to dig under the TempleMount itself.

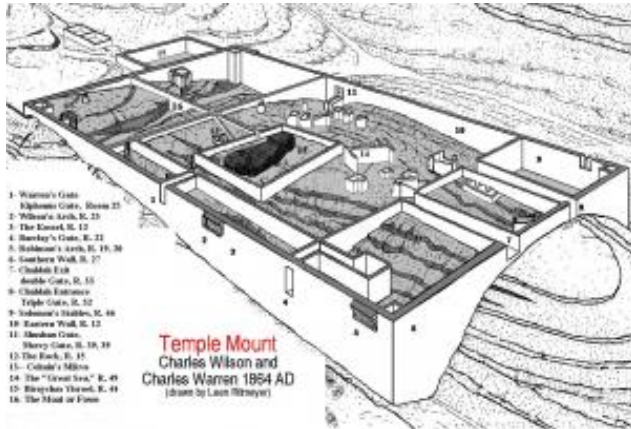
This series of excavations, conducted behind the backs of the authorities, thus served to reinforce two central narratives regarding the archaeology of Jerusalem. The Western, scientific narrative that identified the "real" Jerusalem beneath the surface, while viewing the present inhabitants of the city as degraded, benighted remnants of the past who obscured the importance and destiny of the Holy City; and the Muslim-Palestinian narrative, which viewed archaeology as a tool of western imperialism aimed at undermining the Islamic presence in al-Quds and in the Haram al-Sharif.

Although the 19th- and early-20th-century explorers are considered the founders of the archaeology of Jerusalem, the science of archaeology developed rapidly and the "gallery" method of excavation was soon abandoned. The primary objective of any scientific excavation became the exposure of the historical layers from top to bottom, revealing the order of their stratification. Under British and Jordanian rule, the archaeology of Jerusalem emerged from the twilight, excavations began to take place by the light of day and successive layers of the city's history were peeled away in an orderly fashion, from the surface and on down. Nonetheless, "underground" excavations did not entirely disappear, and it is possible to find heirs to those 19th-century OldCity excavators at different times and in various contexts.

Tunnel excavations following the Six Day War

Following the Six Day War, intensive archaeological activity began in and around the OldCity. Leading researchers from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem were among those to conduct extensive excavations: Nahman Avigad in the Jewish Quarter; Benjamin Mazar south of the TempleMount (the Ophel), and Yigal Shiloh on the southeast hill of ancient Jerusalem (the City of David). These excavations were conducted according to accepted modern methods, and underground systems were approached from above, revealing their access points and their relation to the overlying structures.

There were also, however, non-scientific excavations: In 1969, at the initiative of the Ministry of Religion, the [excavation of a tunnel](#) began along the Western Wall, underneath the densely built-up Muslim Quarter houses that border the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. This excavation continued until the [beginning of the 1990s](#), and among other things re-exposed Warren's Gate, the gate leading from the TempleMount, beneath the present-day city level. Although this was done under the auspices of a government ministry, this excavation was for many years a covert operation: it was unlicensed by the Israel Department of Antiquities (the predecessor of the IAA) and no record was kept of its finds.



In the first phase of development of the tunnel, visitors had to enter and exit through a single opening near the Western Wall. In 1993, the extension of the Western Wall Tunnels through to the Via Dolorosa in the Muslim Quarter were completed, although its opening was delayed until 1996. These were the early days of Benjamin Netanyahu's first tenure as prime minister, less than a year after Yitzhak Rabin's assassination and at the height of the political struggle with the Palestinian Authority for political control of East Jerusalem. Under the aegis of then Mayor Ehud Olmert, it was decided to open the northern opening of the tunnel, on the Via Dolorosa. The opening of the tunnel—"the rock of our existence"—provoked violent demonstrations and clashes between Israeli forces and Palestinians throughout the West Bank, in which dozens were killed and hundreds were injured.^[3] With the cessation of the confrontations, the [Western Wall Heritage Fund](#) began to use the northern exit of the tunnel in order to increase the number of visitors to the Western Wall Tunnels. Thus the Western Wall Heritage Fund expanded the area of its control up to the heart of the Muslim Quarter.

Tunnel excavations under archaeological auspices

Since the mid-90s, the IAA has become the central and virtually exclusive organization conducting excavations in the OldCity and the Historic Basin. The IAA is responsible for the conduct of excavations from the Siloam Pool on the slopes of Silwan to Herod's Gate in the northern wall of the OldCity.^[4] Most of the excavations are done at the initiative of organizations other than the IAA (governmental and non-governmental), whether as salvage excavations done before construction work or as development excavations for tourism purposes.

As for underground excavation activities, these began, modestly at first, in the area of the Gihon Spring/'Ein Umm al-Daraj (details below) at the request of the settler organization, El'ad, and the Israel Parks Authority. The turning point came in 2004 when, on the southern slopes of the City of David archaeological park—located in the Wadi Hilweh neighborhood of Silwan—an ancient pool and the remains of a Roman road leading up from it toward the TempleMount were revealed.^[5] At the same time, at the top of the Tyropean valley, extensive excavations began under the Ohel Yitzhak Synagogue adjacent to the Western Wall plaza.^[6] For knowledgeable observers, it was clear that these two enterprises, although occurring at a distance from one another and seemingly separated by the walls of the Old City and the houses of Wadi Hilweh, were in fact connected by the ancient streets

and drainage channels discovered back in the days of Bliss and Dickie. It seems likely that the idea was already broached to link up with those old excavations, both in a physical sense (the rediscovery of old tunnels) and an ideological one (the renewal of the long-abandoned method of tunnel excavations). Since 2004, the IAA has joined forces with the ideological organizations that are developing the area of the Western Wall and the City of David National Park and has begun to realize their plan to connect the City of David to the Western Wall plaza in a single underground system. The system includes excavated galleries, ancient drainage channels, and large underground spaces that were cleared of their contents. In 2005–2008, the IAA began to conduct tunnel excavations both in Silwan^[7] and around the Western Wall—where tunneling was employed to connect between the Ohel Yitzhak Synagogue and the Western Wall Tunnels.

In the southern part of Silwan, in a lateral tunnel excavation, parts of the early Roman street documented in the 19th century by Bliss and Dickie were exposed.^[8] Further on up the slope, above the level of this road, a shaft was excavated from above into Bliss and Dickie's tunnels in order to reveal a covered stone-built [drain](#). This drain seems to have run under the continuation of the same early Roman street. Well over the height of an average person, the channel runs beneath Wadi Hilwe Street and the adjacent houses, continues towards the Temple Mount excavations (the Davidson Center), continuing north beneath the Western Wall plaza.^[9] It should be noted that the excavations in Silwan are funded by the El'ad Organization, and conducted by the IAA as part of tourism development for the City of David National Park.

Since 2007, excavations have been taking place within the Western Wall Tunnels and in the spaces that extend westward to El-Wad (Hagai) Street, beneath the residential houses of the Muslim Quarter. Hundreds of square meters are under excavation, and the works involve piercing ancient walls and removing large amounts of fill, only some of which is methodically documented. These excavations are also to a large extent a return to structures studied by early researchers such as Warren, Hamilton, and others.^[10] They revealed remains from almost every important period in the history of the city: a large hamam from the Mamluk period (Hamam al-'Ein), remains of Aelia Capitolina (the Roman colony built on top of the ruins following the destruction of the Second Commonwealth in 70 C.E.), remains from the early Roman era, and more.

Ancient underground complexes

In the area of the Old City and the village of Silwan are a number of ancient underground complexes, hundreds or thousands of years old, that have been studied during the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. The best known of these are Zedekiah's Cave (aka Solomon's Quarries) in the Old City and the Siloam Tunnel and Warren's Shaft in Silwan. These spaces are an important part of underground Jerusalem.

Zekediah's Cave

Zedekiah's Cave is located under the northern houses of the Muslim Quarter. Its entrance is found outside of the walls, between the Damascus Gate and Herod's Gate. The site was prepared as a tourist site decades ago and is currently under the jurisdiction of the East Jerusalem Development Company. Meanwhile, the Western Wall Heritage Fund is [searching for funding for the development of the site](#).

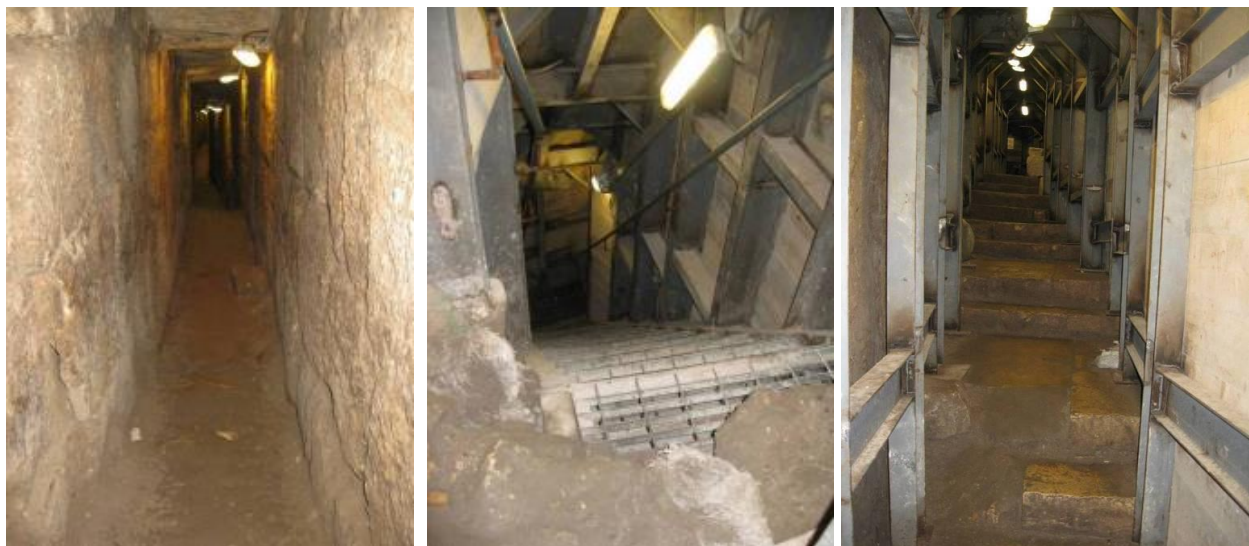
Zedekiah's Cave served as a quarry for hundreds and even thousands of years. The first evidence for the use of the quarry is dated to the 2nd century B.C.E., and it was apparently in use until the 15th century. This is one of the most breathtaking man-made caves found today in Jerusalem, and it was used during a number of periods, under many different rulers, and for a variety of purposes.

The Gihon Spring, Warren's Shaft, and the Siloam Tunnel

In the ancient mound of Jerusalem there are two unique underground systems. The best known of these is the Siloam (Shiloah) Tunnel. The rock-carved tunnel, over 500 meters long, carries the waters of the Gihon Spring/'Ein Umm al-Daraj—located in the Qidron Valley, between the two parts of the village of Silwan^[11]—to the Pool of Siloam^[12] at the southern end of the ancient mound and the Wadi Hilweh neighborhood. From the pool, the spring water runs down towards the houses of Al-Bustan. ^[13] The Siloam Tunnel system consists of a number of carved tunnels and channels, some of which still conduct water and some of which are dry. Studies of the tunnel date the first stages of its construction to the Canaanite period (18th century B.C.E.—the Middle Bronze Age IIb), and the last to the Kingdom of Judah (8th century B.C.E.—the Iron Age II).

Midway between the top of the hill and the Gihon Spring, above the man-made tunnel, lies a system of hewn passages connected to a vertical shaft of apparently natural origin. This is Warren's Shaft, named after its 19th century discoverer, and its dating, purpose, and precise function are disputed.

In the decade and a half since 1995, excavations have been taking place around the Gihon Spring and the adjacent systems.^[14] These excavations are conducted in the underground space beneath a residential structure and under the plaza facing the Silwan elementary school. Recently, excavations were extended by means of a tunnel dug westward, under a stepped public path. These excavations connect to the stepped section excavated in the 1960s by the archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon.^[15] They revealed impressive remains of a fortification dating to the Middle Bronze Age.



Tunnel Excavations as Narrative

The IAA effects an interesting manipulation in its portrayal of the excavations in the Historic Basin. In its response to an Israel Supreme Court petition submitted by the residents of Wadi Hilweh, the IAA claims that the clearing out of the ancient drain underneath the houses in the village is little more than the rediscovery and cleaning of a channel whose existence has been long known.^[16] This claim allows the IAA to emphasize that its tunnels are a *fait accompli*, and that its actions therefore do not pose any new threat to the houses above. At the same time, the IAA publicly advertises its discoveries as new and exciting. Another aspect is connected to the mythological status of past researchers: although some of their conclusions have become outdated, their adventurous spirit, their boldness and originality have turned their research and activities into an object of admiration. It thus becomes easy to embrace the old narrative that views archaeology as a bastion of Western science, and the opposition to it as a symbol of Oriental ignorance. This archaeological myth apparently enables the IAA to ignore changing methods and changing social and political realities. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the IAA relieves itself of any responsibility toward the local Palestinian population, neither informing it of its intents, or consulting with it as work proceeds.

Once the Roman drain has been opened, visitors will be able to take a circular walking trail in underground Jerusalem, beginning (or ending) near the Western Wall. From the area of the Western Wall, the path will go through the Roman drain/road to the Givati parking lot, just a short distance from the City of David visitors' center. There the tunnels of the Gihon and Warren's Shaft can be accessed, and at their exit, at the Pool of Siloam, the underground part of the Herodian stepped street can be reentered, leading back to ancient drain that leads back up at the Davidson Center, near the Western Wall. Those who walk along this path are relieved of the need to confront the present reality of Jerusalem. The circuit is meant to create a visiting experience in a parallel, imagined, Jerusalem, among the remains of two periods: the Kingdom of Judah and the Second Commonwealth. These two periods are identified, in the Israeli narrative, as the most meaningful periods for the formation of Israeli identity and the connection of the Jewish people to the land. The end (or beginning) of the path near the Western Wall plaza emphasizes the close connection between underground Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, the most holy place for the Jews.

According to the version marketed to the public, the excavations in the village of Silwan exposed a pool, a street, and a drainage and sewage system, all dated to the 1st century B.C.E. (Second Temple period), and no more. These structures allow the visitor to relive the experience of making pilgrimage to the Temple in its glory, while also making palpable its destruction. In a [new publicity film](#) shown by the IAA on its website, the connection is presented between the 'Herodian' street in the Western Wall plaza on the one hand, and the tunnels and channels within Silwan, on the other. In this manner the aegis of the Western Wall extends itself to include the whole eastern ridge of ancient Jerusalem and the Wadi Hilweh neighborhood. The IAA and its patrons—the Elad Organization, the Western Wall Heritage Fund, and others—work hand in hand in order to diminish both Jewish history and the history of Jerusalem. All of Jewish history is compressed into the short periods of Israelite-Jewish sovereignty in Jerusalem, while cultural layers that are not associated with Jewish political sovereignty or with the sacrificial cult are ignored. The history of Jerusalem

is stripped both of the eras that preceded the Kingdom of Israel, and of what came after it, when it became the HolyCity for the Christians and Al-Quds for the Muslims.

Moreover, the story told about the tunnels serves as a means of justifying Israeli settlement in the Palestinian village of Silwan and in the Muslim Quarter of the OldCity. The tunnels create an underground Jewish-Israelite city that transforms those in charge, i.e., the Israeli settlers, into inhabitants, and the disempowered, i.e., the Palestinian residents, into a temporary presence.

Summary and conclusions

The excavation of tunnels in the heart of the city entails, first and foremost, the exploitation of an ostensibly scientific-archeological means for the sake of literally undermining the lives of those who live above them. Since a large part of the conclusions of the archeological excavations conducted in recent years are based on 19th- and 20th-century excavations, their importance for scholarship is rather limited. The concealment of the actual scope of the works, the lack of scientific-archaeological rationale, and the emphasis on the emotional importance of the finds for the Jewish people, all attest to the political use that is being made of archaeology. The system of underground tunnels creates a parallel, ancient and unsullied city that pretends to represent the real Jerusalem, a Jerusalem preceding and disconnected from any conflict. This underground city renders the existing multicultural and conflicted city redundant while making control of the Historic Basin seem like a necessity in the eyes of the Israeli public, even at the cost of thwarting any political agreement.

The excavation of tunnels—one of the hallmarks of the 19th-century excavations in Jerusalem—has been revived in recent years. But this time around the excavations are not intended to deceive the authorities, but rather it is the authorities who carry them out, with the aim of deceiving the public.

The conduct of the Israeli authorities, in perceiving and portraying the archaeological finds in the Historic Basin as national property, should be troublesome for anyone who sees the city of Jerusalem, its past and its antiquities, as a place that must acknowledge and preserve the delicate and complex fabric of life of the city and the broad fabric of life of the cultures and peoples within it—in the past, present, and future.

Conclusion

The state of Israel has conducted more thorough archaeological excavations in the Old City than were ever attempted by any other government or organization. Despite this, archaeological activity continues to provide a central pillar in its plans to strengthen its political grip on the Old City. Archaeological activities have a clear influence on control over the Old City. Consequently, the Palestinians and various religious groups also see archaeology as a means to increase their control, or as a threat to their control. As the digging of the tunnels and the Waqf excavations show, political interests and the fear of archaeological discoveries often lead to damage to the research process and to the relics. The absurd result is that this colossal investment in archaeology is often coupled with destruction of irrecoverable sites.

There is an evident gap between the state's inability to enforce the scientific standards expected in heritage sites, and its huge investment in archaeological projects. In addition, the political exploitation of archaeological projects is accompanied by glaring disregard for residents' needs and for the importance of the sites to other religions and peoples.

Israel is not the first to find it difficult to balance the standards of research with the preservation of local heritage sites and the improvement of the multi-cultural residents' daily lives. Jordanian rule, British rule and Ottoman rule faced the same problems, if in varying degrees, and the solutions they found were insufficient. One of the difficulties, no doubt, is the absence of balanced and professional bodies free of national and religious motivations.

We believe that only an international team or committee can cope with the competing interests of so many religious groups, while balancing between residential needs and the requirements of tourism. Only such a team, made up of professionals in the field of heritage-site preservation and conflict resolution, can contend with the various and extreme political interests, chart viable policy and methodologies, and monitor their implementation. International cooperation in Jerusalem is not a new idea; this booklet does not concern itself with an international presence or involvement in daily life – social welfare, health, security, etc. – but with issues uniquely suited to such an intervention.

We believe there is a need for a committee devoted to protecting, preserving and developing antiquities sites in the Old City and its environs. The committee must weigh residential needs and the religious and political situation, and balance the archaeological activity accordingly. Such a committee would provide a solution to a situation wherein archaeological research is led by religious organizations, extreme ideological groups, or even openly political government decisions that ignore basic residential needs. An international committee would highlight the antiquities and the Old City as international treasures, rather than as a national heritage site.

[1] Warren Charles, *Underground Jerusalem* (London 1876).

[2] Nirit Shalev-Khalifa, "In search of the Temple Treasures: the Story of the Parker Expedition in the City of David 1909–1911" [in Hebrew] *Qadmoniot* 2 (116), 1999.

[3] The death toll from the unrest, which lasted from September 24 to September 27, came to 17 Israelis and 70 Palestinians. See the Wikipedia (Hebrew) entry "Mehumot minheret ha-kotel"

[4] http://www.alt-arch.org/jerusalem_map_heb.php

[5] Ronny Reich and Eli Shukron, *Innovations in Jerusalem Studies* 10 (2004), pp. 137–140 (In Hebrew).

[6] H. Barbe & T. Dea'dle, "[Jerusalem, Ohel Yizhaq Synagogue](#)" *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 119

[7] [IAA Press release \(in Hebrew\)](#): "Antiquities Authority's excavations in the City of David reveal the primary drainage channel of the city" (September 10, 2007)

[8] F. G. Bliss and A. C. Dickie, *Excavations at Jerusalem* (London, 1898).

[9] N. Hasson, "[Digging completed on Tunnel under old City Walls in East Jerusalem](#)," *Haaretz*, 25/01/11

[10] A. Onn and S. Wexler-Bdolah, "Wilson's Gate and the Great Bridge in the Days of the Second Temple and in the Roman Period in the light of new Excavations," *Qadmoniot* 140 (2011), pp. 109-122 (In Hebrew).

[11] <https://emekshaveh.org/en/maps/> Excavation and Tourism Areas in Silwan, Site Number 8

- [12] <https://emekshaveh.org/en/maps/> Excavation and Tourism Areas in Silwan, Number 11
- [13] <https://emekshaveh.org/en/maps/> Excavation and Tourism Areas in Silwan, Number 14
- [14] R. Reich and E. Shukron, (In Hebrew) "Recent Discoveries in the City of David Excavations, 2008–2010" Qadmoniot 140 (2011), pp. 70–79.
- [15] <https://emekshaveh.org/en/maps/> Excavation and Tourism Areas in Silwan, Number 6.
- [16] Israel Supreme Court 1308/08 – response of the IAA re: the drainage channel in Silwan